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ABSTRACT

This digest presents summary information on the characteristics and needs of children with learning disabilities (LD). The federal definition of learning disabilities is given and the existences of differences at the state level noted. Next viewpoints on various issues are briefly considered including the special educational needs of students with LD characteristics and low average intelligence, high intelligence, or from different linguistic, cultural, social, or economic backgrounds. The last section considers principles of education for this population including provision of a continuum of program models, transition to the world of work and adulthood, and the need for individualized instructional strategies. Addresses for six organizational resources are also provided. (DB)

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# LEARNING DISABILITIES

## What are Learning Disabilities?

The federal government defines learning disabilities in Public Law 94-142, as amended by Public Law 101-76 (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act-IDEA):

> Specific learning disability means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include children who have problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, or mental retardation, emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

Although the definition in federal law governs the identification of and services to children with learning disabilities (LD), there are variations between states and among school systems. In an attempt to clarify the identification, some states specify an intelligence range. Others add a concept of a discrepancy between potential and achievement, sometimes quantifying the discrepancy using test scores. These slightly different "yardsticks" are indicative of a lack of clear consensus about exactly what learning disabilities are (p.99).

## What are Some Viewpoints about Identifying Learning Disabilities?

It is not always easy to identify one group of people who are clearly LD and another group who are not. Almost all of us have learning difficulties in some aspect of our lives. Some people who are exceptionally skilled with language and even become English teachers have difficulty balancing their checkbooks. Others who are nuclear physicists never do learn to spell correctly. Many people never fail a subject in school but are at a complete loss when figuring out a diagram for making a simple house repair. Similarly, children may experience real success in some school subjects, yet find other school tasks very difficult, frustrating, or time consuming to complete.

Individuals with learning difficulties may appear to possess the characteristics of a person with learning disabilities. However, it is only when those learning difficulties are so pervasive or severe that they markedly interfere with learning or day-to-day living that a learning disability is suspected. Careful assessment by a multidisciplinary team that utilizes a variety of standardized instruments, informal tasks, and observation is an important part of verifying the existence of learning disabilities.

A heated debate continues among professionals about whether special education is needed for some groups of children who seem to show LD characteristics, and if so, what type of help is appropriate. These groups include students who (1) are at the low-average end of the intelligence scale; (2) are highly intelligent; or (3) come from linguistic, cultural, social, or economic backgrounds that differ significantly from their peers.

When a student with a low-average intellectual level experiences academic difficulties, some professionals may feel that the lower intelligence is the cause of the problem. Others may believe that the student could do better academically or make passing grades if it were not for the learning disability.

A student with a high-average or superior intellectual level may maintain grade level performance in elementary school, but develop academic problems in higher grades. Some professionals feel baffled because if a child doesn't show early academic problems, it seems unlikely that LD is the reason for later problems. Other professionals suggest that a capable student may develop sufficient compensations in the early school years to make acceptable grades, but become unable to manage when faced with the note-taking, longer reading assignments, foreign language requirements, and similar demands in secondary and post-secondary schools.

Students who are at risk for success in school, employment, or independent living because of cultural, linguistic, medical, social, economic and similar factors, often also appear to have learning disabilities. Such students may have been malnourished or abused, been raised in a culturally different or impoverished environment, or attended six different schools in 2 years. Some professionals view the

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academic problems as the result of high-risk factors rather than LD. For other professionals, the presence or absence of a learning disability depends upon the unique characteristics of the specific child under consideration. A child can have learning disabilities and at the same time come from a nontraditional background (p.43).

**How are Individuals with Learning Disabilities Served?**

Free public education is mandated for children with learning disabilities from birth through 21 years by IDEA. Depending upon the severity level and individual needs of each student, services may be in a private or public school through a continuum of program models. Thus students with more severe LD are often served in self-contained classrooms or residential settings, while students with mild to moderate LD are usually "mainstreamed" in regular classrooms with a range of additional services as needed. These may include (1) time in a specialized LD resource room; (2) collaboration in which the LD teacher models for or joins the classroom teacher as both work together; or (3) consultation in which the LD teacher provides support, resources, and ideas to the classroom teacher.

A program concept of increasing importance is transition. For the student with LD, the change from school to the world of postsecondary program, work, and independent living is a challenging one. Educators, vocational counselors, and business leaders are working together to develop self-advocacy, functional academics, positive work attitudes, and basic employment skills so important to successful adulthood.

With the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), work opportunities for adults with LD have been further extended through mandated access to simple accommodations. For example, a worker who makes spelling errors might be provided with a spellchecker, while an employee with a reading disability might be furnished with an audiotape of a new procedural manual.

Regardless of which program serves the student with LD, teaching approaches and materials must also be carefully chosen to meet individual needs. In addition to basic consideration of age and severity level, many more subtle factors contribute to the effectiveness of individual instruction. The teacher must not only determine what should be learned, but help establish the specific environment, techniques, and strategies that will maximize each student's learning in both specialized and mainstreamed settings. With the wide variation among students, materials, and approaches, it is unlikely that any two students will be taught in the same way with the same materials in the identical setting at any given time. This is the real challenge facing both the LD teacher and the student with learning disabilities.

**Resources**

Children with Attention Deficit Disorders (CH.A.D.D.)
499 N.W. 70th Ave., Suite 308
Plantation, FL 33317
305/792-8100

Division for Learning Disabilities (DLD)
The Council for Exceptional Children
1920 Association Drive
Reston, VA 22091
703/620-3660

Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA)
4156 Library Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15234
412/341-1515

National Attention Deficit Disorder Association (ADDA)
P.O. Box 488
West Newbury, MA 01985
800/ 487-2282

National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD)
99 Park Avenue, 6th Floor
New York, NY 10016
212/ 687-7211

Orton Dyslexia Society
724 York Road
Baltimore, MD 21204
800/ 222-3123

Other Digests available from this clearinghouse may be ordered for $1.00 each:

Attention Deficit Disorder (E445) ED287261
Providing an Appropriate Education to Children with Attention Deficit Disorder (E512)
Teaching Children with Attention Deficit Disorder (E462)
Learning Disabilities Glossary of Some Important Terms (E517)

Note: The content of this digest was developed by Dr. Jean Lokerson, DLD President, 1991-92; Associate Professor, LD Program, School of Education, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA. The material identified by page numbers was adapted with permission from *Understanding Learning Disabilities: A Parent Guide and Workbook*. (2nd ed). The Learning Disabilities Council, P.O. Box 8451, Richmond, VA 23226.

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